

Sermons at Christ Church

Reaching Out in Faith.

Pentecost 3

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“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” Paul says to the church in Galatia. Paul recognizes the turn that he has made and appeals to the church in Galatia to focus on the turn that they too have made and not to trade the freedom that they have received in Christ by subjecting themselves to the slavery that comes from obedience to the law.

The issue was that some Christians who were once Jews wanted new converts to Christianity to undergo circumcision. His appeal to the church was to stand firm. Don't be distracted. Be focused. Set your eyes towards Jerusalem like Christ did. Don't be drawn by distractions that do not add any value to the gospel which sets you free. Use that freedom in service of love and care for the other.

In the Old Testament story, Elijah protested Elisha following him. But Elisha the disciple was so focused on Elijah that he wouldn't stop following him. It was as if that was his Jerusalem. And because Elisha knew what he what he wanted and so he kept following Elijah until Elijah was taken up to the heavens and was left with Elijah's mantle. That became his mantle of discipleship.

Paul, like Elisha, believed that he had been given a mantle-a mantle of discipleship. At its core, the mantle of discipleship reinforces the freedom that we have in Christ. And as disciples of Christ, we pass the mantle of discipleship from one generation to another because the work of God never stops.

And to do the work of God, we have to stay alert. We have to stay focused. For that reason, we cannot subject ourselves to any yoke that diminishes the new freedom we have in Christ Jesus our Lord. We have to stay alert. We have to stay focused.

Focus is a powerful gift. As small as this microphone is, were I to hold it close enough to my eyes, I will not see any of you. That's the power of focus. It eliminates the stuff that should demand the least of our attention. The more we focus on your past, the more we miss the blessings of the present and the opportunities of the future. The more we focus on the emptiness in life, the less we see the fullness of life. The more we focus on our sins, the more we miss the story about God's merciful grace. The more we focus on our problems, the less we see opportunities for new life and new beginnings. And it takes a kind of discipline that comes out of discipleship to make this focus happen.

A disciplined focused discipleship is one which takes into account the root cause of our polluted lives and then deals with that particular cause.

Here's a story for you. In a quiet village, there was only one well that provided drinking water for all the villagers. Life revolved around the well. People gathered every morning around the well, filling their pots and sharing stories. One day, a stray dog fell into the well and drowned. Days passed before anyone noticed, and by then the water had turned foul and undrinkable. A terrible stench filled the air and the villagers grew worried. Panicked and unsure of what to do, they turned to the village's wise old man for advice. After listening to them, the wise man said, draw 100 buckets of water and the well will be cleaned again.

Trusting his wisdom, the villagers worked together to draw 100 buckets of water from the well. However, when they tasted the water again, it was still polluted. Disappointed, they rushed back to the wise man. He asked them to draw another 100 buckets.

The villagers followed his guidance and together drew 100 buckets of water. But nothing changed. The water remained toxic. Frustrated, they went to the old man the third time and asked for his advice. The man repeated, take out 100 buckets, the water will surely be clean this time. The villagers obeyed. Now after removing another 100 buckets. They eagerly checked the well, only to find out that the water was as dirty as the first time. Feeling defeated, they returned to the wise man and asked, we have removed so much water, yet the well is still polluted, why is it not getting clean? The wise man looked at them and asked a simple question, did you remove the dead dog from the well? The villagers were shocked. No sir, they replied. You only told us to take out the water and not

the dog. The wise man sighed and said ‘How can the well be clean if the source of the pollution is still inside?’ No matter how many buckets you remove, the problem will remain as long as the cause is still there.

Remember this, discipleship isn’t a cake walk. It is tough business because it involves fixing the underlying problems that pollute our lives. Discipleship doesn’t lend itself to self-doubt, attractions of the ego nor the trappings of our former lives. Discipleship is about focus. Discipleship is about a focused message that tells people about the difference that only Jesus can make in their lives.

That like Paul, we have encountered Jesus and we know what Jesus has done in our lives. And because of what Jesus has done and continues to do in our lives, he can do the same in their lives. Discipleship poses this question, are we using the freedom we have in Christ in service as slaves to one another or are we using the freedom to look back on our former lives?

The true gift of freedom that Paul talks about is the freedom to love. To love, is a mark of our discipleship, and so we cannot forsake that love, nor can we look back and reminisce on the time when we couldn’t love those we are called to love.

We have to set our eyes towards Jerusalem-the venue where love lays down its life for the sake of others, the same venue where we ought to be prepared to also lay our lives down for the sake of love.

It is not surprising therefore that Jesus makes this point, that anyone who put their hand to the plow and looks back isn’t fit for the kingdom of God. To look back is to be distracted not only by the noise that questions who our neighbors are, but by the same noise which defines our neighbors as people who only agree with us, live in the same neighborhood with us, the people who look like us, the people who had lived under similar circumstances like us, the people who support us and share our belief in the superiority of one race over another.

When your eyes are set on Jerusalem, when you are focused, when you are a disciplined disciple, you come to understand that our most important freedom is the freedom to be ourselves and the

freedom to grow and discover that who you are will be determined by your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Here's a funny story for you, three poor brothers left their homes to earn money on their own. After years of hard work, they became super rich. When they reunited, they discussed the gifts they could give their elderly mother. The first brother said, I built a big house for our mother so she can live comfortably.

The second brother added, I sent her a Mercedes with a driver so she can travel anywhere she wants. The third brother smiled and said, I've outdone both of you, remember how mom enjoyed reading books and you know her eyesight isn't what it used to be. So I sent her an incredible parrot that can talk and he will read her a new book every day.

Days passed and their mother sent out letters of thanks. She wrote to the first son, Robert, the house you built is so huge. I live in only one room but I have to clean the whole house. She wrote to the second son, John, I am too old to travel, my eyesight isn't what it used to be so I rarely use the Mercedes. She wrote to her third son, dearest James, you have a good sense to know what your mother likes, the chicken was delicious.

This past week we welcomed 47 kids to our annual VBS and Choir Camp. And in a few moments, we will baptize Isla. Just like the relationship between Elijah and Elisha, the greatest gift we can pass on to these children is the mantle of discipleship-with which they can do two things-first, walking on the path that refuses to subjugate itself to past narratives that legitimizes the dehumanization of others.

Second, nurturing and mentoring the courage it takes to set their faces towards Jerusalem-with the knowledge that the path to Jerusalem isn't easy, it is fraught with many dangers and heartbreaks. But in so far as we all stay focused, in so far as we all keep the main thing the main thing, in so far as we hold on to the gospel which sets us free, and in so far as the love of neighbor becomes our ultimate goal, we will always surpass ourselves in being good and in loving the neighbor as ourselves.

Jewish Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once wrote these words “I don’t need you to agree with me, I need you to care about me.” And if we can all teach each other to always focus on loving and caring for each other, irrespective of who they are, we would’ve succeeded in holding on to the mantle of discipleship.

Amen.